
WRITING WITH LIGHT: Words and Photographs in American Texts by Mick Gidley.

Angeliki Tseti



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/8542>

ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

Angeliki Tseti, « WRITING WITH LIGHT: Words and Photographs in American Texts by Mick Gidley. », *European journal of American studies* [Online], Reviews 2010-2, document 8, Online since 26 October 2010, connection on 20 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/8542>

This text was automatically generated on 20 April 2019.

Creative Commons License

WRITING WITH LIGHT: Words and Photographs in American Texts by Mick Gidley.

Angeliki Tseti

REFERENCES

Bern: Peter Lang, 2010. Pp. 287. ISBN: 978-3-03911-572-3

- 1 Following the recently developed scholarly interest in the combination of word and image in texts, *Writing with Light* comes as a valuable addition to a series of works aiming to explore the multifaceted interface between literature and photography. Similar works and collections of essays published in the past decade have drawn attention to the complexity and diversity of the intersections and interactions of the two media while providing historical schemata –such as Francois Brunet’s *Photography and Literature*- or raising mostly theoretical and philosophical issues of time and place, memory, identity, representations of race or gender, but also the evidential, indexical, ontological or epistemological nature of the photographic code and message. One can mention Marsha Bryant’s *Phototextualities*, Cunningham, Fischer and Mays’s *Photography and Literature in the 20th century*, Hughes and Noble’s *Phototextualities: Intersections of Photography and Narrative*, but also periodical series such as *Word and Image Interactions*, edited by Martin Heusser. While dealing with the same preoccupations, *Writing with Light* touches these issues through the spectrum of culture as this collection works under the premise that the social circumstances in which these texts were produced are of primary importance, and treats already acknowledged and celebrated texts as “cultural documents of their time(s) – and ours” (4). What is more, the collection enhances the underlying argument by focusing its lens on North American texts, thus managing not only to narrow the frame, but also to provide a picture of “photonarrative” activity in a specific spatial locus

in fullness. Although the arrangement of the texts is chronological, the reader soon detects a strongly –albeit sometimes confusingly intertwining– thematic categorization. The essays touch upon matters of location, temporality, memory, history and identity; they explore the formal aspects of the two media and illuminate the cultural imperatives at the time of production; they discuss contextualization and interpretation as well as the politics of representation. In effect, their diversity and complexity is as great as the field itself.

- 2 The spatial dimension is the first theme to be explored, as location and landscape are pivotal in the first essays of the collection. The West features in the two opening essays. The first, “Feminising the West,” written by fiction writer Clive Sinclair, traces the story of a particular photograph, a portrait of Marshal Earp’s wife. By exploring the facts and fabrications surrounding it, it presents the myths developed through the interaction of words and images. The second, Martin Padget’s “Native Americans, the Photobook and the Southwest: Ansel Adams’s and Mary Austin’s *Taos Pueblo*,” offers a contextualization of *Taos Pueblo*, an important photobook published in 1930. While following the trail of *Taos Pueblo*’s conception and realization and simultaneously drawing parallels with Curtis’ “*The North American Indian*” and the projects of other artists of the time, Padget offers an enlightening/illustrative account /picture of the fascination generated by Indian Cultures and the Southwest.
- 3 Shifting towards Urban America, in the third essay of the collection, “An Ethics of Seeing in Sontag’s *On Photography*” and Weegee’s *Naked City*,” Anna Woodhouse also addresses a different, much debated concept and discusses “the moral and political implications of those precarious photographic relationships with reality” (43). Using Sontag’s “*On Photography*” and the Situationist movement as backbone, Woodhouse offers an analysis of Weegee’s “*Naked City*” that raises issues of (a)morality, propriety and ethics. The author reads Weegee’s photographs while placing them in the sociopolitical context of their publication in an attempt to negate the photographer’s “non-interventionist” role, but also to appropriate importance and meaning to the audience’s gaze. In effect, according to Woodhouse, such photographs “remain a part of a spectacular discourse, but their meanings have changed” (61). In the essay “The Bachelor’s Drawer: Art and Artefact in the work of Wright Morris,” Caroline Blinder writes on the work of photographer and novelist Wright Morris and the ways in which, through a variety of textual forms, he “consistently takes the vernacular landscape and turns it into a wistful commentary, not only on the state of America but on the intimate relationship between an artist and his subject”(65). Juxtaposing Wright Morris’s work with other artists, particularly the illusionist still life painters of the 19th century, Blinder moves from the political to the personal and explores the ways in which artefacts –rather than faces of actual people– can be favored to documents to indicate lineage and to illuminate eras and lifestyles, how their photographic depiction can express “traces of past lives” and, in parallel, the ways in which writing can direct or dictate the meaning with which these images are imbued by the audiences.
- 4 Adopting a more formalistic perspective, the three essays to follow are concerned with meaning and the ways it is expressed but also clarified through the text; these texts aim at analyzing the formal aspects of the media, at exhibiting how the initial assumptions generated by the “reading” of the photos are often debunked, but also at bringing the importance of the underlying cultural imperatives to the limelight. Beth Bennett’s “Shooting Slavery’s Image in *Black Power: A Close Reading of Three Richard Wright*

Photographs,” ventures to show how Wright’s photographic technique in the book traces a progressive acceptance of his own heritage, an attempted reconciliation with his slave-trading African ancestors, by exploring the visual representations of two political Gold Coast leaders. Bennett argues that these three photos represent Wright’s vision and revision of Africa’s slave-trading history using contrast to illustrate the conflicting attitudes –accepting and denying – with which he viewed African men. In Neil Campbell’s “Robert Frank and Jack Kerouac: ‘You got eyes,’” meaning is also at the centre of the essay, yet in an alternative mode, as constructed outside of borders and frames. Starting from both Kerouac’s and Frank’s sense of “dislocation” and the feeling of outcast that characterizes the work of both artists, Campbell seeks to draw parallels of artistic association between the two, revolving mostly around the common desire to move beyond traditional boundaries and established limitations, in search for a “total imagery,” a kind of “long sentence.” While keeping Kerouac and Frank’s friendship and mutual influence in the fore, Campbell focuses on Kerouac’s “vertical” prose and Frank’s “deframing” technique respectively, which are not only governed by the same principles but also manage to create a Barthean “pensive” effect in that they engage the reader/viewer in a revelatory dialogue which expands vision beyond visibility and uncovers layers of meaning.

- 5 Alongside with the formalistic concerns treated in the aforementioned essays, the preoccupation with issues of identity surfaces in parallel, especially given its almost inevitable pertaining to issues of race and nation. This axis is accentuated in Eric J. Sandeen’s “Picturing Colorado: Robert Adams and the Myth of the Frontier,” which brings region to the fore as a determining element. Sandeen’s preoccupation with photography introduces issues of representation, while simultaneously returning to the importance of landscape, as the author focuses on Robert Adams’s early work and explores the ways in which Adams ventures to depict post WWII suburban changes. Sandeen reviews Adams’s photographs as “an important complement to suburban images” (122); he reads the photographs as texts narrating the destruction and (re)construction of the American West and highlights their function as a spatial recording of American history, thus proclaiming the establishment of a visual style whereby the imaginative reconstruction of what was once there, what “has been” and now is not, in fact, rehabilitates vision. Shamoan Zamir’s “The Image in the Archive: Gerald Vizenor’s *The People Named the Chippewa*,” explores issues of identity in a tellingly different way, through the filter of history and historiography. Stemming from Kracauer’s insistence that “the historian must tell a story,” this study supports the notion that the most efficient method for historiography to remain faithful to the facts is to narrate and proceeds to investigate Vizenor’s rejection of oral tradition and its replacement with archival photographs which are incorporated and re-contextualised in seemingly unrelated texts, neither commenting on nor referring to them. Vizenor aims at questioning received narratives, encouraging multiple interpretations and enhancing the plurality of meaning, as well as highlighting the power of visualization. As a result of this fascinating project, a type of “hybrid history” text is formed, a text which moves between history and memory.
- 6 The remaining essays of this collection are temporally oriented, juxtaposing the past and the present in different ways and through different angles, though not always explicitly. In “Activating and Acting on the Past: The Experience of History in August Sander’s and Richard Powers’s *Three Farmers on their Way to a Dance*,” Diane Morgan uses Walter

Benjamin's theories and views to explore the ways in which the present and the past intertwine, through the viewer's gaze. This essay presents Power's novel "Three Farmers" and its relation to Sander's photograph as a metaphor for a more general postmodern practice of viewing and interpreting, as the narrative of temporal transition, temporal fluidity even. Morgan touches upon the nature of history in general, as she elaborately unfolds the ways in which viewers mobilize tools of the present to decipher elements of the past and thus eventually realize the instability and infinite possibility of the future. Working within a different frame in "My Favourite Piccies: Sequencing, Structuring and Essayism in Photo-Anthologies by Szarkowski, Debray and Roche," Andrew Stafford is concerned with what he calls "essaying the photograph." Preoccupied with questions and criteria of selecting which image to use, what type of narrative/written form to accompany it with or which aspect of the photographic medium to focus on, Stafford explores the photo-book and anthology in an attempt to theorize them. His springboard assumption being that the selecting and ordering of two or more images in sequence form a narrative, Stafford embraces Parr and Badger's statement that the photo-book has "important generic affinities with literature" yet it reaches further, since it is more specific. Rather than merely focusing on a topic, the photo-anthology also "proposes some kind of didactic thesis about the nature of the medium itself" (189). A functional photo-book has the ability to operate on a different level, according to this essay; when photographs are combined "in the visual equivalents of sentences and paragraphs," (189) the photographic voice is shaped and heard and the medium envelops in its full complexity and (political) meaning. The sequence of photographs in a photo-book and their role as bearers of cultural meaning is also at the centre of Francisca D. Fuentes' essay "Paul Fusco's *RFK Funeral Train: The Photobook as Memory Text*." Using the example of "Funeral Train" and Paul Fusco's pictures of the last journey of R. F. Kennedy's coffin, Fuentes raises the issue of form and institutional discourses affecting the meaning of events that are part of a national consciousness and examines the photobook as memory text. Fuentes' essay captures the readers' interest in its description of the differences between the individual and collective arraying of photographs and, most importantly, in its emphasizing Fusco's technique while constructing the photobook, the visual shorthands recruited to weave cultural memory but also the construction of the layout and design; "Funeral Train" engages us in a discussion on paratexts; when considering a photo-book we must also consider the blank pages, the distribution of images, the juxtaposition of text and image and so on, as these are the elements which eventually shape the perspective, create an emotional response from the part of the audience and facilitate cultural participation.

- 7 The two last essays of the collection touch upon history and time but also memory in more subtle and indirect ways. Katharine Burkitt works on two texts where photographs are not directly present or visible, narratives "haunted" by the photographs they include and somehow halted by their descriptive representation. In "Frozen Moments: The Motif of the Photograph in Works by Anne Carson and Michael Ondaatje" Burkitt elaborates on the suggestive nature of the photographic "frozen moment" as well as the effect generated by cross-media representation, on how "the frozen moment of the photograph in the context of a literary narrative draws attention to a text's cross-generic affiliation and produces a self-reflexivity which ensures a focus on the medium as well as on the literary context" (223). The author's interest lies precisely in this stasis and the ways it affects notions of time and space but mostly memory. Questions of margin are raised; the observer's gaze is brought to the fore as an important aspect of representation and

disruption of linear time. The common thread is history. The final essay of the book is fitting only if placed in the general trend of “photoliterary” tradition which seems to favor autobiographical narratives. Written by Mick Gidley himself, “Shadowing Indians, Catching Curtis – with Autobiographical Asides,” provides a short account of the circumstances and social background surrounding the birth of Curtis’s *The North American Indian* and then proceeds to present recent literary responses to Curtis’s work, such as Marianne Wiggins’s *The Shadow Catcher*.

- 8 Despite its thematic complexity and borderline lack of structural clarity, *Writing with Light* is, all in all, an intriguing collection of essays that not only functions as an interesting exercise of word-image theories on a national level, but also encourages similar ventures with the plurality of material covered. The different styles employed in the texts –some scholarly, rich in allusions and references while others story like or (auto)biographical–invite and can fascinate a broad range of readers of all backgrounds, however unfamiliar with this field or with the American cultural tradition.

AUTHOR

ANGELIKI TSETI

University of Athens